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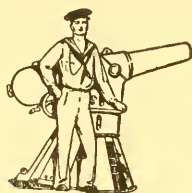
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Colonel John Bull

(1731-1824)



A Preliminary Study

By

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COLONEL JOHN BULL

Among the early Pennsylvanians who bore the surname Bull, the most notable was John, Colonel in the Continental Army and Adjutant General of the province. Government archives, especially those of Pennsylvania, have preserved such a large number of facts about his life, and of his letters, that when these are gathered together and added to data preserved by his descendants one obtains a clear idea of his character as well as of his career. Perhaps the traits which appear most prominent were his great strength and untiring energy, a zeal for the cause of his country which no personal rebuff or adversity could diminish, sterling honesty and open frankness about himself and his affairs, with a goodly share of business ability.

Although he lived to be 93, the first indication of illness which I have found is in the contemporary newspaper account of his wife's funeral. She had died suddenly when both were 79 years old, and the husband, "although much exhausted by sickness and old age, addressed the audience" in a few words of resignation to the will of the Lord "and then sank exhausted." His portrait, which once hung in the Peale gallery, has disappeared, but I fancy him like a certain familiar type of sturdy, active, bluff, Revolutionary gentleman, his ruddy face, set off by cue and ruffles, showing the effects of a life spent mainly in the open and on his horse's back. The Indian chiefs of the Six Nations, who regarded him as their best friend in Pennsylvania, described him as "a strong man raised like a great tree," which is certainly suggestive.

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Thomas Bull, John's father, lived on a farm of 150 acres in Worcester Township, and this therefore appears to have been the place where John, the oldest son, spent his boyhood. As he was not quite 17 when his father died, leaving to him with his mother the care of his two brothers and three sisters, he was presumably still living there when he met and married Mary Phillips of Chester County in 1752. He was just 21 then. A year and four months previous to this, his mother, Elizabeth Addams Bull, had married in Philadelphia a young man named Thomas Rossiter, Jr., the eldest son of an apparently poor family, for they had inherited no land from their deceased father. We do not know when young Rossiter died, but there were no children, and no doubt Mrs. Rossiter continued to live in her old home with her young children. Thomas' will had divided his farm between the two older sons, 100 acres to John and 50 to William, but the title not to vest in them till William was 21. John added to his share in 1757 by buying six acres adjoining it, from S. Kime, but sold this property to J. A. Meyer in 1763. William sold his part the following year, to the same purchaser, so I judge William reached 21 not later than 1763. In October of the same year in which John sold the old home, his step-father bought 172 acres in Providence Township (when he is called "of Providence, yeoman"), so I suppose the Rossiters and the younger children moved then; the eldest daughter, Ann, was already married to Henry Newberry.

John Bull's possession of the brains and will power to make his way upward in the world is best shown by comparison with the conditions of his birth. The whole province advanced, but he did more than advance with it. His father and both grandfathers are described in deeds as "yeomen" possessing their own small "plantations" (the word farmer not being used then); such were likewise his uncles and brother William, though the latter is also described as a saddler—no doubt because his father's will directed that he should be put to school till he was 15 and then to learn a trade. John Bull, on the other hand, is described as a "gentleman," even as early as 1760. His grandfathers were English; his grandmothers

children
Bull's
also the original tract

apparently both German; and, like their neighbors, none of them had learned to write even so much as their own names—which fact in no wise hampered them in their long and active lives as pioneers in a wild, new land. John's mother went a little step further, for instead of a simple cross, she wrote her initial E as "Her mark" in lieu of signature.

John's father, Thomas, however, must somehow have found a teacher, for in his will he proudly says that he made it with his "own handwriting." He thought that he knew something of the law of such matters, so when I find that he signed his name many times as witness to the wills of others, I suspect that his less learned neighbors were wont to call on him for material aid in the preparation of their last testaments. Thomas' provision in his will that his younger children should go to school till they were 15 shows that the eldest, our John, must also have had such education as the country afforded in those days. In his letters one sees that though the literary grace of a Franklin cannot be claimed for his pen, yet he was a clear and fluent writer. One of his granddaughters has left us a record in which she says of him and his wife: "They prospered in worldly matters and were respected by all. Their daughters were educated at the best schools the city of Philadelphia afforded. Their only son was an accomplished physician and a good linguist."

Socially, Colonel John's high official positions, both civil and military, in the provincial government brought him in contact with the most eminent men of Philadelphia, which was a leading center of culture in the new world. We have evidence, as well as tradition, to prove his friendship with George Washington, which doubtless dated from 1758, when both were officers of the Forbes expedition to capture Fort Duquesne, where Pittsburg now stands.

It may be of interest at this point to quote the following about Washington, from the *Britannica*: "His education was but elementary and very defective, except in mathematics, in which he was largely self-taught. Sparks has 'edited' the spelling, grammar, and rhetoric of Washington's Writings to such an extent as to destroy their value as evidence." Country schooling was evidently no better in Virginia, even among the upper classes, than it was in Pennsylvania!

Another friend of the Colonel in Philadelphia was that learned astronomer and distinguished patriot and official, David Rittenhouse, whose only brother, Benjamin Rittenhouse, had married Bull's eldest daughter in 1770. (Benjamin was superintendent of the gun-lock factory of Pennsylvania through the Revolution.) The four younger daughters, growing up after the Revolution, also made excellent marriages.

But whether the outspoken Colonel felt himself quite at home amid the refinements of the city society is to my mind somewhat doubtful; certainly he hastened away from it when his public duties were over and spent the rest of his days about as far from it as his pioneer instincts could take him, in what he called "a Distant Land."

LIST OF MILITARY COMMISSIONS HELD BY COLONEL JOHN BULL

- 1758, May 12, to early 1759. Captain of a company (of about 55 men) in his Majesty's Third Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment ("Provincial Forces"), with service in command of Fort Allen and on the Forbes expedition which captured Fort Duquesne—a bloodless victory, which Bancroft considers of the "greatest importance" and which was due to Captain Bull's negotiations with the Indians.
- 1759, April 29, to ——. Recommissioned Captain in the same battalion; military service not known.
- 1775, November 25, to 1776, January 20. Having applied for appointment as Quartermaster to the army, or in command of a battalion, in the Continental Army about to be organized, he was elected by the Continental Congress as the first Colonel of the First Pennsylvania Battalion raised for defense of the colonies. He had under him eight companies of 79 men each, or a total of 1500 men. The Continental Congress received a Memorial from the Captains and Subalterns of this battalion "complaining of the conduct of Colonel Bull," and referred it to a committee. January 19th, marching orders to Canada received. January 20th, Congress heard a Memorial from Colonel Bull begging leave to resign his commission on account of ill-treatment by many of his officers, between whom and himself he requested a decision; offered to serve his country in any other way. January 22nd, resignation accepted. This was his only experience in the Continental Army.

177^c July 4th, to about January, 1777. Colonel of a Battalion of Associators in the County of Philadelphia ("5th" in his commission, "6th" in "Archives"), by appointment of the State Assembly. These were new organizations for home defense without pay unless called into the field, and when enlisted were sent to Amboy, N. J., for brief service in watching the British on Staten Island till more permanent troops were organized. As Bull's civilian positions kept him busy in Philadelphia, the Council of Safety gave him leave of absence only from August 17th to September 15th in order to be with his battalion in the field. (Perhaps the men were there no longer than that; all Associator battalions were disbanded early in 1777.) Arms and ammunition being still scarce, their weapons included pikes and "tomahawks."

1777, February 15th to June 17th. Colonel Commandant of the fortifications at Billingsport: a resumption of his civilian work as General Superintendent, with added military authority over the troops stationed there. Appointed by the Council of Safety (of which Bull was member) and paid at rate of \$85 per month. During this period Bull also constructed the principal part of Fort Mercer, at Red Bank, N. J., opposite the mouth of the Schuylkill, which was intended to protect the chevaux-de-frise which he laid in the Delaware channel between it and Fort Mifflin on Mud Island. He also placed similar obstructions in the channel opposite Billingsport, a few miles below, but when he left in June there was still a few weeks' more work needed to complete the whole. When the British arrived in the autumn they did not attempt to break through these defenses, but troops were sent by land to take them in the rear, so the Americans left them without fighting. The enemy partly dismantled or burned these fortifications and took up some of the river obstructions; the rest remained till removed in 1784.

1777, May 2nd to June 17th. Colonel of the Pennsylvania State Regiment of Foot, appointed by the new Board of War. Commission issued May 8th. This regiment was being formed from remnants of several former regiments which had been under Bull to some degree at Billingsport, N. J., and other points on the Delaware River within a few miles of Philadelphia, and was intended for defense of the city. In April, Bull had reported that he was trying to "cultivate a little harmony" in the so-called regiment, but its officers had not yet been commissioned as such and "a great number of the privates are prisoners upon parole (a circumstance perhaps new)," and there was general jealousy and dissatisfaction. April 30th the officers received commissions and (according to the journal of one of the Lieutenants) "proceeded to the arrangement of the officers," and early next morning the "regiment was properly arranged, after which three companies * * * were entertained by a harmonious band of music and passed the day in jollity." The appointment of Bull caused a violent protest and threats of resignation from all the officers, who claimed, in a Memorial to the Assembly of the State, they had been promised they should "rise by seniority in Battalion" so that by appointment of a Colonel from outside they "consider themselves very much aggrieved, as thereby what little Rank they hold in the service of the State is Entirely Destroyed." June 2nd the strength of the regiment was 44 officers and 524 men. June 10th the Assembly voted to transfer the regiment to the Continental Congress for incorporation in the Continental Army, and June 17th the promotion of Bull was followed by the appointment of a new Colonel. The latter invited the delighted officers to "meet him at 4 P. M. at the City Tavern" where they celebrated by "drinking some gallons of Madeira." This regiment was ordered away and became the 13th Pennsylvania (Colonel Walter Stewart). November 12, 1777, it was incorporated in the Continental Army.

1777, June 17th, to January 13, 1778. Adjutant General of the Militia of Pennsylvania, appointed by the Board of War. This was the most stirring and critical period of the Revolution about Philadelphia, and Bull had manifold duties and responsibilities. General Armstrong was in command of all the State Militia, 4000 men being called out at the end of July and most of them sent to Wilmington when Howe's army began to disembark (August 25th), after which they were used as a reserve for the Continental Army and for local defense. Orders and letters show Bull providing the militia with weapons and food, and some time after the battle of Germantown (October 4th), when several militia officers were lost, he succeeded General Irvine in command of the Second Brigade on the east side of the Schuylkill, but (so far as I now know) he did not participate in any battle during any part of his military career. His one recorded experience of fighting was when "a large body" of the enemy went on a foraging raid to the northwest of Philadelphia, December 11th to 26th, and Bull was ordered, December 24th, to make a demonstration toward the city to "alarm them In Order to Call their attention from Plundering in Chester County." He reported, after reaching the "Northern Liberties" of the city, between Third and Fourth streets, and "Within Musquet Shot of the Enemies Line," that "I drew up my little Division and haveng Our Two Twelve Pounders, with 2 comps of artillery, I rather strechd my orders by Sending them 8 well diracted Cannon Ball, Which no Doubt Took Place near ye Church." (The aim was good, for they did fall near Christ Church and "alarmed the city" without doing any damage.) Bull's report concludes: "We Wish'd them a Merry Crismes by causing them to Beat to arms and fire their Cannon from the Lines from all Qurs., their Ball Raked our Little Parade both on Right and Left, but without the Least Damage. We brought of one Prisoner, some of their Horses, &c."

Colonel Bull appeared before the Supreme Executive Council on January 13, 1778, made a report, and presented account for his pay for the past eleven months, which was ordered paid. (For time as Adjutant General, at rate of \$100 per month.) The Council then resolved that on account of reducing the militia an Adjutant General would not be necessary in future and therefore ordered that the office be abolished and that "Colo. Bull be informed, in the most respectful terms."

1779, October. "President Reed announced that he intended to take the field at the head of the Penna. troops, and Col. Bull was appointed adjutant-general" but "the projected movement was abandoned." (I have not verified this.)

CIVILIAN POSITIONS HELD BY COLONEL JOHN BULL

- 1761, February 28th (perhaps earlier) till the Revolution (apparently). One of the Justices of the Peace for the County of Philadelphia. He was also one of the Justices of the Court of Quarter Sessions of the county.
- 1774, November to September 17, 1776. Was, by election, one of 40 members of the Committee of Inspection and Observation of the County of Philadelphia (this did not include the city), the duty of which was to detect persons not conforming to the patriotic "articles of Association" (for trade boycott and price control), which the new Continental Congress had framed. These county committees were formed from the members of earlier township committees who had been on the side of the colonies from the beginning. John Bull signed a resolution as chairman of this committee, July 20, 1776, but Colonel William Hamilton had been chairman in June and May preceding. May 18, 1776, this committee appealed to the Assembly of Pennsylvania to "maintain liberty even if forced most unwillingly to declare independence." These committees were dissolved after nearly two years' activity.
- 1775, January 23rd to 28th. Member of Second ~~Convention of the Pennsylvania~~ *Provincial Conference* as one of 12 chosen to represent the Philadelphia County Committee of Inspection. Pennsylvania was now in fact governed by citizen's committees which had superseded the old, too-loyally disposed, Assembly (i. e., Legislature). This convention voted its determination to take up arms if redress was not obtainable from Parliament, "though loyal harmony is preferred," and it voted unanimously to urge a law prohibiting future importation of slaves into Pennsylvania.
- 1775, September 3rd. Defeated in election for Sheriff of Philadelphia County by William Dewees, who had long held the office; vote was nearly two to one.
- 1776, February 8th, Continental Congress resolved "That the 250,000 Dollars voted yesterday [for the use of the army at Cambridge], be sent to the Paymaster-General under the care of Mr. Bull, and two other trusty persons." February 13th the Treasurer was ordered to advance "colonel Bull" \$150 to defray his expenses in carrying this money. February 26th a letter from General Washington acknowledged receipt of a letter brought to him from Philadelphia by "Col. Bull" the evening before. (This is the only occasion known to me when he traveled north of Pennsylvania.)
- 1776, June 18th to 25th. Member of Pennsylvania Provincial Conference of Committees of Inspection. This unanimously approved of a declaration of independence and ordered elections to a convention to frame a new Constitution for the Province. For attendance at this convention Bull was paid £3, 18s, 10p.
- 1776, July 15th to September 28th. Member of convention which set aside all old government, prepared and passed a new constitution and took other important actions. Franklin was chairman. Bull was one of eight representatives, elected July 8th, from Philadelphia County. He was member of several important committees, and was paid £19, 10s, 2d for attendance. Was given leave of absence August 17th to visit the camp at Amboy (where his regiment was), but was back September 16th.
- 1776, July 23rd to March 13, 1777. Member of the Council of Safety (David Rittenhouse, chairman; 25 members), by election of the Constitutional Convention. The Council was authorized to exercise the whole of the executive powers of government so far as relate to the military defense and safety of the province, superseding the former Committee of Safety; and, in fact, took entire control between the end of the old governmental agencies and the organization of the new. The courts having suspended their activities since June, the convention on September 3rd appointed the members of the Council of Safety as Justices of the Peace for the State with power "to take acknowledgments of deeds, and cognizance of criminal offences and breaches of the peace, and in cases of petty larceny, under 3 shillings, to proceed to punishment." (County Justices had previously been appointed.)
- 1776, August 6th to ———. One of six Commissioners for Philadelphia County named by the convention in accordance with an ordinance "to hear and determine the cases of all persons in prison." (This was to correct injustices done under the old government.)
- 1776, September 26th to December 2nd. General Superintendent of the Works at Billingsport, New Jersey, by appointment of Council of Safety. Continental Congress had ordered the approach to Philadelphia by water to be defended, at its expense, and Kosciusko had drawn plans for a fort at Billingsport, about 12 miles down the river, with chevaux-de-frise, which was now to be built by Bull, with Captain B. Jones as engineer. This work was interrupted by orders to evacuate the place, and when resumed, in February following, Bull returned there as Colonel Commandant (see "Military").
- 1776, November 12th. Council of Safety ordered a great quantity of valuable military stores immediately removed "to Col. Bull's at Norrington" and he was directed to procure proper guards for them. (A large part of his estate there had been sold a few days before this.) December 13th these were transferred to Lancaster, and for 12 days at this time Bull was busy procuring wagons "for the army" but also used by civilians who were fleeing from the expected British. Yet this did not materially interfere with his presence at the constant meetings of the Council during the winter; the following conference with the Indians, however, occasioned his absence for two weeks.
- 1777, January 26th to February ———. Commissioner to treat with Indians at Easton, Northampton County, representing, with Colonel Dean, the Council of Safety. Two other Commissioners were from the Continental Congress and remaining two from the Assembly. The Indian Commissioners were six chiefs, representing the six nations, who had

come, with about 200 other Indians, to complain of the breaking of the Fort Stanwix treaty (1768) in that whites had gone into their land and bought tracts from their young men, whom they could not control. They made various other complaints and requests, and repeatedly asked that Colonel Bull, "whom they seemed to look at as particularly charged with the execution of their private affairs" (according to Minutes of the Proceedings), should be appointed as a permanent Indian Commissioner. They called Bull "a strong man raised like a great tree, that we can depend upon," and gave Indian names to him and the other Commissioners. Congress had appropriated \$1000 to buy presents for these Indians, but had given no instructions to the Commissioners, and their recommendations received scanty attention. The following May, Bull memorialized Congress, saying the Indians had sent messengers to him asking for action, but he could do nothing unless officially appointed. May 27th Congress resolved that the legislative power or Assembly of Pennsylvania ought to take action either by removing the settlers from Indian lands or by compensating the Indians, but the Assembly only discussed and postponed. In an official letter from Bull of July 9, 1779, he thus deplores the failure of his efforts, which "had they been properly attended to I am Clearly of opinion might Easily have preserv'd the Interest of many of those Indians and thereby not only Prevented the Destruction of Wioming but would have been the means of Saving the Lives of many and Preserving in some measure the Peace of the Frontiers of this State in Particular."

1777, February 14th to October 13th. Member of the first Assembly (i. e., sole legislative body) of the State of Pennsylvania under its new constitution. Elected by the freemen of Philadelphia County to fill one of the vacancies occasioned by four members-elect not having qualified. Took seat February 18th. March 21st Assembly took a recess; was in session May 21st to June 19th; recessed again till September 13th, when it got a quorum by having ordered the members who were in camp to attend. It passed a pension law for wounded soldiers, drafted by a committee of five, including Bull, and adjourned to Lancaster on the 18th, as the British were fast approaching Philadelphia. It met there October 6th and adjourned on the 13th. Bull's name appears in the proceedings a number of times, in spite of the fact that he was simultaneously in the army, either in command at Billingsport or as Adjutant General, and during the first two months was likewise a member of the executive government of the State, not to mention that in the first month he was also ex-officio a Justice of the Peace. A record of simultaneous activities which it would be hard to excel!

1777, March 13th to April 10th. Member Pennsylvania Board of War. On March 4th the Supreme Executive Council was organized under the new constitution and, after reserving to itself the civil department "which requires great attention," it delegated full executive power over military matters to a Board of War and a Navy Board; the former of nine members, with David Rittenhouse as chairman. Thus was the Council of Safety (of which Bull had been member) transformed and its work better distributed. The board held daily meetings, but Bull was present only six times,—after the Assembly had recessed. On April 10th a new board was formed, with only three of the original members and two new ones.

(It was in September of this year, 1777, that the British burned much of Bull's property at Norrington and his family had to flee.)

1778, January 19th. Bull, having received word that he was no longer Adjutant General while he was at Hummelstown on his way to his "Distress'd family" "in a Distant Land," wrote a touching letter on his "fate" in now being inactive, after all his public services and private misfortunes, which he thought justified a better treatment. He appears to have been on his way to Berkeley, (West) Virginia, at this time.

1778, August 31st to ———. Confirmed (continued?) by the Assembly as one of the Justices of the County Courts.

1778, August 31st. Reported to the Supreme Executive Council that at their request he had "view'd" the bridge over Schuylkill at Flatland Ford, near Valley Forge; that it required immediate repairs, and specified these in detail. I presume he was directed to make them.

1778, September 12th to December 3rd. Again Superintendent of Works at Billingsport and Mud Island. The British having left Philadelphia in June, the Council determined to repair the damage they had done, erect some batteries, temporary barracks, etc., restoring the river defenses, and directed Bull to employ workmen and procure or buy the materials to complete the work as expeditiously as possible. He was to be paid £3 per diem and forage for one horse, and he received £50 for a "ration account," apparently in addition. On July 9th he reported to the Council that he was "Exceedingly Mortified and Embarrass'd" to find that he could not procure the laborers to carry on more than a part of the work, so that he was "not fully Employed," and suggested that it might be desirable for him to be sent temporarily to the "Frontiers of this Province" to exert desirable influence on the Indians, as he had done on previous occasions. Council evidently thought he could not be spared, for it sent a "request" to the troops stationed about Billingsport to help Colonel Bull "in a Service of so much Importance to the City."

1779, February 27th to November 25th. Continued the above work, which after May 14th was done in accordance with plans of the French General, Du Portail. Paid \$24 a day "for his trouble and service."

1779, autumn and winter. Superintendent of repairs on a house at Sixth and Market streets owned by the State through confiscation from a Tory, and declared to be the official residence of the President of the Supreme Executive Council (this title was changed later to that of Governor of the State).

- 1779, September 17th. In a letter of this date Bull and Charles Wilson Peale are called "two of the committee of this city," i. e., Philadelphia. (In November and December of 1778 Bull—then called in deeds "of Berkeley, Va."—had bought two adjoining houses on Mulberry, now Arch, Street, between Seventh and Eighth, where he may have been living at this time, and also a large lot at the northwest corner of Mulberry and Seventh. The last he sold in 1786 to David Rittenhouse, who made it famous as the site of his home and of his observatory.)
- 1780, January. Commissioner to a national convention to limit the prices of merchandise, which had been called by a meeting at Hartford, Conn., October 20th previous, and assembled at Philadelphia January 5. One of three (from Pennsylvania?).
- 1780, April 1st to November 27th, and perhaps longer. Commissioner of Purchases for Philadelphia County. Appointed by the Supreme Executive Council, evidently to do all the buying in said county for the state government. Required to give bond in the sum of £30,000.
- 1780, June 2nd to July 5th. By appointment of the Council, with two others, buyer of provisions and other necessities for the Federal Army, in Philadelphia County, in accordance with an act passed recently to meet an urgent temporary need.
(These are the last of Bull's public offices in the Revolution. He sold his Philadelphia house in 1782, and appears to have continued to travel often between Philadelphia and Berkeley until he finally settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania.)
- 1786, June. Bull came to Philadelphia from Northumberland County with public dispatches respecting some disturbances at Wioming. For this he was paid his account of £8, 15s. He is said to have moved to Northumberland the previous year. In 1787 he was taxed there for having one negro—a man he had bought in 1778.
- 1802, Was a candidate for the State Legislature, but defeated by Simon Snyder, the incumbent and Speaker of the House, afterward Governor of Pennsylvania. (In 1790 the former single legislative body, the Assembly, had been superseded by the Senate and House plan.)
- 1803, December 6th to April 3, 1804. Was member of the Fourteenth House of Representatives of Pennsylvania, which sat at Lancaster between these dates. There were 86 members in all, the four from Northumberland County including Simon Snyder and John Bull. Bull was immediately put on the committee "on roads and inland navigation" (one of the three large standing committees), and also served on special committees, including one "of grievances" appointed December 8th. Bull belonged to the Federal party.
- 1804, December 4th to April 4, 1805. Member of the Fifteenth House, serving on the same committees as the previous year.
- 1805, December 3rd to March 31, 1806. Member of the Sixteenth House, of which his nephew, John Gronow Bull, was also a member, from Chester County. He was present through the session and was on some special committees, but not on the large ones above named.
This ended the long and honorable public career of John Bull, when he had almost reached his seventy-fifth birthday.





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